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**Review of: McComas Taylor: Seven Days of Nectar: Contemporary Oral
Performance of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa**

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their potential relevance to vital issues of the day. It is a detailed study that does not lose sight of the bigger picture, the enduring values through which individuals and traditions navigated divergent points of view over time. Simultaneously making ancient India more familiar to modern minds and putting contemporary politics in deep historical perspective, *Against Dharma* will be of interest to advanced undergraduates, Indologists, and South Asianists of all stripes, observers of contemporary Indian politics, and those interested in the resonances and connections between the modern and the premodern.

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Seven Days of Nectar: Contemporary Oral Performance of the Bhāgavatapurāṇa. By MCCOMAS TAYLOR. Oxford: OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2016. Pp. xvi + 288.

In recent times there has been a growing interest in Hindu religious performances and the performative traditions connected to authoritative texts in modern and contemporary contexts. In order to analyze the ways in which well-established performance traditions are continued and transformed, the historical dimension of text-performances provides an important context of study. In academic debates about the relationship between oral and written forms of the composition and transmission of texts in Indian intellectual history, mainly focusing on the Veda, Sanskrit epics, and Purāṇas, representations of textual performances in classical and early modern literature and arts have been dealt with occasionally. The spectrum of older performance traditions has increasingly become a topic of historical research (for instance the 2015 volume edited by Francesca Orsini and Katherine Butler Schofield, *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*). The relationship between written and oral forms of text reception and production is an important area of research. A considerable number of studies demonstrate that in much of Indian cultural and intellectual history the two forms of engagement in texts are interconnected, and this helps scholars to trace commonalities and differences between past and present textual performances. The study of performances in contemporary settings thus implies dealing with the features of the text and its transmission that shape its performance as well as with larger questions relating to Hindu religions in contemporary post-colonial, globalized contexts, in particular new media, transnational mobility, and political and economic appropriations of religion.

McComas Taylor attempts to address these topics in studying the so-called *saptāha*, a seven-day performance of the *Bhāgavatapurāṇa* (hereafter BhāgP). The *saptāha* belongs to a well-known spectrum of performative traditions, but has only rarely been studied in detail. The author presents accounts of performances in the North Indian pilgrimage center Vrindavan, the village Naluna in Garhwal (Uttarakhand), and Australia's capital city Canberra. In presenting his findings, Taylor draws on what he calls the "metaphor of *yajña*" (p. 23), which provides not only the model for understanding the structure of the *saptāha*, but is also used for organizing the book's chapters. The elements of the *saptāha* treated by the author as well as the chapters of the book are presented by using Sanskrit terms from Vedic sacrifice: the account of the *saptāhas* is called *yajña*, the sponsor *yajamāna*, the exponent *hotṛ*, the text Veda, the verses *mantra*, the audience *viś*, the results *phala*. The metaphor of sacrifice also includes the academic framing of the analysis, as introduction and conclusion are called *kṣetropadhāna* and *pūrṇāhuti*. Such blurring of the boundaries between "inside" and "outside," emic and etic, perspectives does not lead to a discussion of the position of the researcher vis-à-vis the state-of-the-art research in anthropology and performance studies. The author also refrains from dealing with methodological issues with respect to the over-arching parallelism he draws between *yajña* and *saptāha*. His understanding of *yajña* remains unclear; it is referred to as Vedic sacrifice (which one?), an "ancient ritual" that is practiced in "Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina communities to mark various stage-of-life events" (p. 23), and "the paradigmatic form of worship in the Indic world," which currently sees a revival and reinvention (p. 23). A discussion of recent studies of contemporary *yajña* performances would have been helpful in clarifying the use of term and the suggested parallelism with the *saptāha*.

A good point of departure for such a discussion would have been available (but not mentioned) works such as F. Smith's 2000 study on a London performance, T. Lubin's 2001 study on performances in Maharashtra, S. Bechler's 2010 article on *yajña* in globalized spheres, and the theoretical discussion by M. Naidu 2013. Although Taylor recognizes that Vedic ritual and the *saptāha* differ, he does not discuss these differences, but instead refers to the latter as a "knowledge-sacrifice" (*jñāna-yajña*, p. 24) without explaining the reason for using this term, for instance by dealing with its provenance (*Bhagavadgītā*, etc.), or by pointing out that this is an emic view expressed by the performer in Canberra (as is mentioned on p. 50). Such renaming could have been the occasion for dealing with the structural differences between *yajña* and *jñāna-yajña*, for instance by noticing that "expounding" the BhāgP is at the center of the contemporary performances (accordingly *hotṛ* is rendered "expounder"), whereas—as far as we know—a Vedic hymn or *mantra* is not expounded by the priests while reciting hymns, pouring the oblations, etc. What could have been an interesting point of comparison (even if metaphorically used) becomes problematic when the terms of comparison are not put into historical or systematic perspectives. This applies also to the interpretation of Sanskrit terms. For instance, the contemporary audiences are called "*viś*," rendered as the "community" of Vedic society (p. 147) as distinguished from warriors and Brahmins. The question as to who constituted the audience of this or that Vedic sacrifice is not addressed, nor are the different social contexts and religious affiliations of contemporary audiences discussed in any detail. Since the metaphor remains unexplained, the author suggests a continuity and congruence between Vedic sacrifice and modern Hindu performances. In fact, historical, philological, and sociological data point to a more complex picture.

The structuring of the book according to the elements of the performance / Vedic sacrifice entails that the individual performances are not discussed comprehensively. For each performance the information about sponsor(s), audiences, use of the text, exponents, and schedule has to be put together from the different chapters. While the richness of the material makes this worth the effort, a full account of the three performances is difficult to obtain because they are not covered evenly, or information about one performance is substituted with that about another. For instance, the chapter on the text ("Veda") consists of a summary of the contents of the BhāgP as performed by Satchitananda Sai in Canberra in English. In this case the *saptāha* was preceded by an exposition of the *Bhāgavatamāhātmya*, which is briefly summarized as well. But the actual use and performance of the original Sanskrit text is analyzed in the following chapter (verses—*mantra*) by means of an audio recording of a performance given by the same exponent in Melbourne 2012. While Taylor rightfully stresses that no *saptāha* is the same and that the audience is an important agent (p. 191), the repercussions of this selectiveness are not considered. One also wonders why the author only analyses some "forty-odd" verses from the *Bhāgavatamāhātmya* recited during the performance, but none from the BhāgP. No detailed information on the use and interpretation of verses in the other performances is given. In a similar way, the information about sponsor and audience of the Canberra performance is replaced with information gathered about these topics at a *saptāha* in Brisbane. Reasons mentioned for these inconsistencies are the author's being busy with other things at that time (p. 74), or the need for more data (p. 147; yet: not more, but other, data are presented).

A selective and unsystematic approach can also be observed with respect to the discussion and use of available academic research on the topics addressed in the discussion of the BhāgP and the spectrum of performative genres (such as *kathā*, *kathā-vacan*, *pārāyaṇa*) to which the *saptāha* belongs. For instance, the characterization of the genre of Purāṇa is as simple as possible ("premodern Indic Wikipedias," paraphrasing W. Doniger; p. 2) without giving the reader references to more complex accounts (for instance G. Bailey's work, or the 2001 study by Chakrabarti on the role of Purāṇas in regional traditions). Without providing any evidence it is ruled that "to be a Hindu is to have internalized these purāṇic narratives" (p. 3). It is sweepingly stated that the Western academic study of Purāṇas until 2005 was under the influence of H. H. Wilson's view that it is a "second-rate" corpus (p. 7), ignoring the work of those Western scholars (Rocher, Matchett, Brown to name just a few) who dealt with the importance of this literature. Without mentioning the academic debate on how to understand the word "*bhāgavata*," Taylor states that BhāgP can be taken to mean "Ancient Narratives of the Lord" (dropping the meaning "belonging to the Lord" that he mentions, without pointing out that the term can also mean "follower / devotee of Kṛṣṇa / Viṣṇu"). Such inaccuracies—already noted with respect to the author's

understanding of certain Vedic terms—occur also in the chapter dealing with the expounded Sanskrit verses. The translations given are not always as “literal” as maintained. For instance, in translating the description of the BhāṅP as “*sākṣāt śrī kṛṣṇa svarūpa*” (p. 132) Taylor does not explain his transliteration (obviously taking *śrī kṛṣṇa svarūpa* as a compound), seems to omit *sākṣāt*, and pays no attention to the philosophical-theological implications of the term *svārūpa* in the context of Krishnaite *bhakti* when rendering the line as “It is the manifest form of Śrī Kṛṣṇa” (instead of “manifested as / present as Śrī Kṛṣṇa’s own form”). A recognition of the theological implications would have allowed the author to highlight the special role of the text in the bhakti communities and in performances.

The lack of precision and in-depth discussion and the selectiveness in dealing with the state of the art and with methodological and theoretical issues in any detail are unfortunate, given the considerable merits of the study. In his focusing on the less-studied genre of one-week performances Taylor rightfully pays attention to a comparatively neglected, but important format of recitation and exposition. In this way he addresses a lacuna in research. The choice of the three settings enables him to present quite different accounts of the oral performance, thus confirming the multifaceted presence of authoritative texts in Hinduism and, in particular, the different occasions for performing the BhāṅP. The information about the background of different “expounders” and the places of training is important for further research. It is convincingly demonstrated that such performances are not only embedded in specific religious communities (in particular the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition), but are also attractive to other audiences and can serve various purposes (ritual, emotional, etc.). In order to lend the *saptāha* its distinct profile and place it in the wider landscape of Hindu performative practices, it would have been helpful to contextualize this genre in greater detail and deal with the differences from and commonalities with the other performative genres by taking available academic studies as a point of departure (such as the unmentioned 2001 volume on “chanted narratives” edited by Molly Kaushal, or the above-mentioned collection edited by Orsini and Schofield).

While Taylor seems to conduct what anthropologists call “multi-sited fieldwork,” the methodological issues that this kind of research entail are not addressed. In the brief theoretical section (pp. 18–23), Taylor states that he adopts R. Bauman’s ideas about oral performance and mentions the four “spheres” of performance described by R. Schechner, but without detailing the repercussions that the scheme of spheres may have for his research. The author does not note that recent performance studies have moved from stating the necessity to study “performance as interaction” (as is stressed by Taylor as his point of departure, p. 23) to dealing with epistemologies and various other frameworks (spatial, affective, etc.) involved in such interactions. In studying such interactions, a reflection about one’s own position as observer and researcher is indispensable, in particular when the goal is to study “the experience of audience members” (p. 149). In rather general terms, this experience is interpreted as “transformative,” as an experience of “communitas” and liminality (drawing on V. Turner; pp. 188–91). In order to study such “communitas” the audiences and their expectations have not only to be recorded, but also to be contextualized. Chapter six (dealing with “verses—*mantra*”) demonstrates the fruitfulness of such theoretical / methodological reflection when the fact of the “twin processes” of what has been called “entextualization” and “contextualization” is convincingly presented as an analytical tool that helps to explain how authority is created in performance and how performers adapt to situational demands. Although recent developments in the formation of Hindu religious communities and practices are mentioned (new media, digital performances, diaspora and global contexts, the rise of Hindu nationalism, and “middle-class” Hinduism), they are not included in the analysis of the performances. One way to do so would have been to describe how the text of the BhāṅP is used and expounded so that it has the effect, as the author notices (pp. 74, 169), that audiences in Australia experience their “Indianness” and / or “Hinduness” (are these meant to be the same?).

Although the points of criticism raised in this review permit only limited praise, the richness and complexity of oral BhāṅP performances clearly emerge in Taylor’s study, which is in this respect a welcome and commendable contribution to the field.

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